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Each generation of believers must take seriously its responsibility to define "faithfulness" within the context of its particular culture. While certain timeless truths and practices remain unchanged, an ever-changing culture raises new questions that authentic disciples of Jesus must address.

Clearly, this is not a simple task. When issues are not directly addressed in the scriptures, we must prayerfully seek wise discernment. It is also true that a particular issue may well be addressed in scripture, but the circumstances were so dramatically different in the biblical culture that the answer may not be particularly relevant in today's world. Consider, for example, the New Testament treatment of slavery. Paul calls those who are slaves to be faithful to their masters as to Christ, and calls for slave owners to be just and loving. How do we embrace such teachings in a world where slavery is universally rejected as below the dignity of humanity?

Our present culture is raising new questions almost daily. The rapidly advancing understanding of the biological sciences is creating discussions that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. New ethical questions are being generated at a bewildering pace. But not all cultural changes are raising new questions. Some questions that have been debated for centuries have come to the forefront again because of the current world situation. One such issue is the question of the relationship of the Christian to earthly government. After the events of September 11, there has been an amazing resurgence of patriotism and prayer. Surely none of us thought we would ever see such dramatic changes in attitudes about God and country in our lifetimes. Churches throughout the United States displayed "God bless America" signs on their property. Many changed their bulletin banners to a patriotic theme. Others prominently displayed the American flag. But for some believers, particularly younger generations, all of this created a sense of discomfort. Was this newfound patriotism the right response for the church? What should the proper response be for the Christian in relationship to his or her earthly citizenship?

These questions are addressed in the New Testament. Jesus, living in a time of great political turmoil, almost dismissed as irrelevant the question of the relationship of a child of God to earthly government. When his enemies thought they had trapped him with the question of paying taxes to Rome, Jesus answered, "'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's.'" Jesus' real concern was for the second part of his teaching, "'. . . and [give] to God the things that are God's'" (Luke 20:25). From his dialogue with Pilate, it is clear that Jesus regarded earthly governments as institutions empowered by God for maintaining peace. Paul continued Jesus' teaching

by calling believers to be submissive to the governmental powers and to pay taxes (Rom 13). He instructed Titus to teach the same thing. Peter echoesthis thought in 1 Peter 2:13–14.

The New Testament does reflect some civil disobedience. Peter and John refuse to obey the edict of the religious rulers in Jerusalem to be silent about Jesus. Revelation clearly calls for Christians to be faithful to God and not to succumb to worshiping the emperor or sacrificing to false gods. Thus when the believer is caught between obeying earthly authorities and God, there is no doubt where his or her ultimate allegiance is—in all circumstances he or she is called to be faithful to God.

However, for the most part, the biblical witness called the believer to have a quiet spirit and to live as a citizen of another kingdom, one that is not of this world. Jesus called his disciples to "'strive first for the kingdom of God'" (Matt 6:33). He called for an undivided loyalty to another reality, to live as children of God under his direction (in his kingdom). Paul encouraged believers to see themselves as ambassadors for Christ, citizens of heaven eagerly waiting for the return of the savior. Peter called believers to live as resident aliens in this world, looking to the next world as one's home.

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Revelation reflects the conflict of the believer in a world of chaos and failing order. The believer is constantly reminded to look to that which is real and lasting—the reality of an eternity in the presence of God. So no matter what happens in the world, we are to recognize that God is calling the ungodly to repentance. The believer is to remember that he or she is secure in the care of God and that ultimately, God will be victorious. Revelation is a call to faithfulness in the midst of a dying world.

The book of Revelation leads the modern reader to wonder how the early Christian lived out this message of hope. Modern readers show a great interest in the years that follow the writings of the New Testament. How did these early Christians deal with the issue of church and state? How did they apply the principles found in the canonical writings? Does the primitive church have something to contribute to our understanding of the proper role of the Christian as an earthly citizen?

The answer seems to be a definite "yes." To explain why, I must first limit my observations to the first three centuries CE. Radical changes occurred during the fourth century that dramatically altered Christian treatment of the question of the Christian and government. There is consensus among historians that the Constantinian era not only "legalized" Christianity, it brought about dramatic changes in the way the Christian related to the world and all of its institutions. The "resident alien" motif was lost as the Christian identified himself as being of this world, and identified this world as having a religious dimension. For the most part, religious responsibility was handed off to the clergy. The laity's responsibility was to support the clergy in their religious work. This view is quite different from that of the primitive Christian.

Because the Constantinian era so dramatically changed the perception of the Christian's relationship to the earthly government, the first three centuries of the Common Era hold valuable information for answering the question at hand. What was the attitude of the believer concerning government before the Christian became fully enmeshed in the post-Constantinian world? Before answering this question, we must first note that if one is looking for a simple, unified answer, there is none. The idea that the early church was unified in form, function, and response to such questions is to fail to take in the enormity of its beginnings. There is evidence of early Christianity not only in the Middle East but to the south in Egypt and beyond and to the east from Syria to as far away as India, to the west throughout the Roman Empire and to what would become the Eastern Greek church, as well as to the northern barbarian countries. One must realize that the level of concern for the question of the Christian's relationship to the government is dependent on the gov-

ernmental situation in which the church found itself. In some places and times, the church suffered greatly from persecution. In other places, the church enjoyed relative peace. The world was widely diverse; therefore, it is difficult to find a simple, unified answer.

Secondly, a real difficulty in studying this period is the paucity of available documents. Any conclusion drawn from the writings of this period must take into account the lack of primary documents from which one has to draw. Nevertheless, there are some interesting findings to consider.

First, there are widely varying answers to the question of Christian citizenship. Some pagan writers held Christians in disdain. Suetonius (secretary to Emperor Hadrian) mentioned Christians as "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition." Tacitus, a Roman historian, blamed Nero for using the Christians as scapegoats in the burning of Rome, but had nothing good to say about believers. He saw them as notoriously depraved, carriers of a deadly superstition, and full of degraded and shameful practices. The most well known commentary on Christians from the early second century is the famous dialogue between Pliny the Younger, a Roman official in the province of Bithynia, and Trajan. He assumed it was a crime to be a Christian, but was not sure what to do in terms of punishment. He was angry because Christians were obstinate with "unbending perversity." He called Christianity "this contagious superstition" that was spreading like an infection through the country villages.

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Likely, most of these negative thoughts were generated because of the Christians' view of salvation only in Christ Jesus. The Romans were very inclusive in their religious views and found the idea of one God and one truth offensive. Christians were even accused of being atheists because of their refusal to accept other gods. Other charges included incest and cannibalism, likely a misunderstanding of the "brother and sister" language and the Lord's Supper (eating flesh and drinking blood). It seems that most of the negative responses toward Christians and their participation in society came from a misunderstanding of their single-minded devotion to Christ and his teachings—including loving one's enemies and refusing to harm others or to seek vindication when wronged.

Some pagans begrudgingly recognized their good conduct. Galen (129–199), a Greek doctor, commented that Christians lived lives of exceptional purity and self-discipline and self-control "in matters of food and drink." He was even most impressed with their keen pursuit of justice, commenting that Christians have "attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophy."

From their own perspective, Christians viewed themselves as model citizens. Athenagoras pleaded with those bringing charges against Christians to examine the Christian life carefully. They would not only find their charges of wrongful behavior unjustified, they would discover exemplary lives of love and truth. Justin Martyr suggested that Christians were moral, upright, and law-abiding citizens who were the empire's "best allies in securing good order." Justin admitted that Christians did not participate in many social activities (feasts and other things associated with pagan religion), which might cause them them to be suspected of wrongdoing. However, Justin insisted that this did not make them bad citizens.

The brevity of this study does not allow us to consider all the sources. For the most part, however, the negative statements that were made about Christians in relationship to earthly government had to do with misinformation and a lack of understanding of the Christian message. Any practice that deviated from Roman norms was considered dangerous and subversive. The fact that Christians refused to acknowledge any god but their own caused them to be regarded as dangerous and counter to the general good.

Among believers, however, several attitudes are evident. First, anything of this world, including government, simply was not important. Government was seen as a necessary part of a fallen world. If one was a soldier or government official, this might be considered problematic. But for the most part, the response of the early church seemed to be "Why spend your life doing something of such little value?" Their identities were, for the most part, wrapped up in the purposes of God. Some have suggested that this was because of their naïve idea that the Lord was about to return. But whatever their motivation was, they were serious about living their lives within the context of God's purposes.

For the most part, early believers were from the poorer classes. There are examples of high officials being believers, but most were common workers. Celsus, a Roman philosopher, saw believers as "wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who could not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters." While he saw this as a "put-down," it is likely true that most believers were not in positions of power and authority. This may have had an effect on their view of participation in government. Or it may well be that believers chose to live simple lives, finding this more consistent with the call of the kingdom. Because government positions demanded a certain amount of aspiration and self-acclamation, such a role was simply not attractive to those attempting to be authentic disciples of Jesus.

Early believers also had a very different view of life from the view that we hold. Life was a struggle. Governments were unstable. The social climate was difficult. Natural disasters occurred with disturbing regularity. In such an environment, the call to trust in an unchanging God whose kingdom was not limited to those earthly difficulties was very attractive.

What can we draw from this brief study? First, as a result of September 11, many Christians have been introduced to the reality in which not only our early brothers and sisters lived but that in which most of the world lives today. Too many American believers before 9/11 lived in the fantasy of a safe world. It was too easy to change channels when one saw images of violent death or starving children in other parts of the world. Now that our own land has been attacked, we must face the truth of the matter. Life is fragile, we are mortal, and this world or any institution of this world does not deserve our trust. Our early brothers and sisters knew this and refused to place their trust in anyone or anything but God. Surely it would radically change our lives if we could relearn this lesson of trust from them.

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Secondly, we must consider that which is often summarily dismissed as a "naïve" worldview by early believers may just hold the key for us in answering our question. The early believers, without question, expected an imminent return of Jesus. This did not dismiss the importance of their earthly responsibilities, but it clearly changed the way they looked at this world. Because their identities were wrapped up in their understanding of the imminent return of their Lord, they simply had little interest in the institutions of this world. One gets the idea that if one were a soldier in those early years, he would likely have a puzzled response from fellow believers rather than a response of condemnation. They might have asked their brother, "Why have you chosen to be a soldier when you have such a higher calling?" Clearly, there would be difficult issues, such as the code of allegiance and the possibility of having to kill, but these issues would not have been the focus.

What we might easily dismiss as naïve may be the answer. What is the proper relationship of the Christian to government? Render to Caesar what is his, but give your lives to God. Pay taxes? Yes. Be a responsible citizen? Surely. Most importantly, realize the nature of your calling in the kingdom of God and

give your life in his service. The early Christians would remind us that we are not of this world. We live in it, but our calling is to be ministers of reconciliation, focused on and dedicated to God's calling for our lives.

I am not suggesting that one cannot be a soldier or an employee of the government. I am not sure that this is even a relevant question. Such questions should be left to the individual believer to determine. This I do know, whatever we choose to do with our lives in terms of vocation does not deserve our hearts, only God does. If anything else is the focus, we are guilty of idolatry. Since Constantine (and even before!), we have struggled with a worldview that pits our spiritual identity against our physical identity. We have assumed a friendship with our world that allows us to spend our lives for things that ultimately have no meaning. Our perspective of the world makes those early Christian writings sound quaint and uninformed. But can we dismiss their worldview so quickly? What really matters? I wonder what would happen if we would again be known by this description from Justin's Letter to Diognetus (5):

> For the distinction between Christians and other men is neither in country nor language nor customs . . . they show forth the wonderful and confusedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship. . . . Their lot is cast "in the flesh," but they do not live "after the flesh." They pass their time upon the earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all men. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and they gain life. They are poor and make many rich; they lack all things and have all things in abundance. . . . They are abused and give a blessing, they are insulted and render honor. When they do good they are buffeted as evildoers, when they are buffeted they rejoice as men who receive life. (translation: Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1913])

The voice of the early church shouts to us, "Be in the world, but not of the world."

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